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Citation: Gibson, Mel (2019) Comics, childhood and memory: An autobiographical narrative (Part 1). Confessions of an Aca-Fan.

Published by: Henry Jenkins

URL: <http://henryjenkins.org/blog/2019/10/19/comics-childhood-and-memory-an-autobiographical-narrative-part-i-by-melanie-gibson>

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Comics, childhood and memory. An autobiographical narrative.

Everyone writes and re-writes their autobiographies as they remember, in a continual process of selection and construction. As Annette Kuhn (1995) described it, memory is 'driven by two sets of concerns. The first has to do with the ways memory shapes the stories we tell, in the present, about the past-especially stories about our own lives. The second has to do with what it is that makes us remember: the prompts, the pretexts of memory; the reminders of the past that remain in the present (p.3). Some of my childhood memories are anchored by what I was reading to a specific place and time, in line with what Kuhn suggests, as having been an enthusiastic comic reader generally means that I have a timeline of my childhood, given that they were typically bought new or second-hand shortly after publication. It also means that comics are tied in a direct way to memory, something which as an 'aca-fan' became linked with the practice of object elicitation, of using comics as objects in interview.

As a British child born in 1963 in the North East of England my memories of comics incorporate a wide range of texts, including material like *Rupert the Bear* and *Teddy Tail*, anthropomorphic narratives which originated as newspaper strips. I also had access to imported superhero comics, which my father bought for me (or perhaps for himself with me as a secondary, pass-along, audience). These were exclusively DC titles, especially *Batman*, *The Flash* and *Justice League of America*. They were aimed at an audience much older than I was when I first read them, with him, as an under five year old. The combination of comics featuring adult characters and a parent who was around only intermittently, given that he was studying art in London, was potent, giving those comics a heightened significance. That he also used elements of them in art works stressed their importance too and may have contributed to my interest in comics as an 'aca-fan'.

However, I also had access to comics in the form of annuals that had been gifts for my mother as a child. These annuals related to a gender specific title called *Girl*, a weekly periodical which had specific class and gender signifiers. More costly than many of the other titles available, and partly printed in four colour rotogravure on comparatively high quality paper, it was also a broadsheet. The majority of titles for girls, in contrast, were tabloid and although they might feature a cover in colour, were usually printed in black and white, with occasional uses of red as a spot colour (see Figure 4 for an illustration of this). All of these physical qualities attached to *Girl* could be seen as signifying the middle-class nature of the periodical. Who the audience actually was is not so fixed, but the intention was, whoever the reader, to guide their aspirations. It is *Girl* and the genre that it belonged to, the British girls' comic, which will be the focus of the majority of this article. I would add that I am focusing down further still, on titles that were aimed largely at younger readers, rather than those in their teens.

The robust annuals, part of the wider culture and marketing around comics, along with toys and a range of other materials and events, were a staple Christmas gift in British households throughout the late twentieth century. The annuals I got to read had been published in the 1950s and contained a mixture of other materials alongside comic strips, including prose narratives. These earlier British publications linked me with both my mother and grandmother through forming the basis of some of our shared reading and family history. As Kuhn states, 'an image, images, or memories are at the heart of a radiating web of associations, reflections and interpretations' (1995, p.4).

Engaging with both the superhero comic and the girls' comic, two very different comic traditions, meant that they became juxtaposed in my mind. Both inhabited what seemed to be gendered spaces and readerships and, indeed, almost appeared to be capable of being used as tools to mold me into a 'proper' girl or boy. Both also seemed to contain characters whose activities were linked with gender. I was, however, most drawn to stories in *Justice League of America* and to one in particular in *Girl*, entitled 'Belle of the Ballet'. Whilst the content is very different, what drew me in was that the male and female characters had shared aims and objectives.

The example shown below, which I have analysed in depth elsewhere (2008), is a complete short story from an annual (in the British weekly anthology comics stories could run for twelve weeks or more, each week ending with a cliff-hanger). What is important in this context is that David, the male dance student is a regular character who trains and performs alongside Belle and Marie. He does not dominate the stories, but is simply part of their friendship group. In this example the friends investigate a dance focused mystery where class and the acceptability of dance are also key themes.

This narrative and others about Belle and her friends, the encouragement of family members and the increased cultural interest in ballet as a socially appropriate activity resulted in my taking ballet classes when I was around five. This ended rather swiftly when stage fright and the theft of my *Twinkle* comics from the dressing room after a performance resulted in my refusing to go back to classes again (or read that comic).

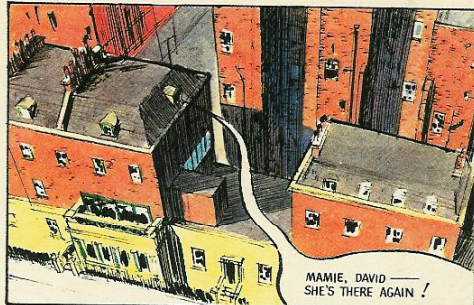


# Belle of the Ballet

IN *Little* MISS NOBODY

STORY BY GEORGE BEARDMORE : DRAWN BY JOHN WORSLEY

BELLE AUBURN AND HER FRIENDS MAMIE AND DAVID, PUPILS AT THE ARENSKA SCHOOL OF BALLET, HAVE DISCOVERED A MYSTERY. LATE ONE AFTERNOON IN THE SCHOOL'S ATTIC...



MAMIE, DAVID — SHE'S THERE AGAIN !



WHAT'S SHE DOING NOW, BELLE ?

ARABESQUES, I THINK.



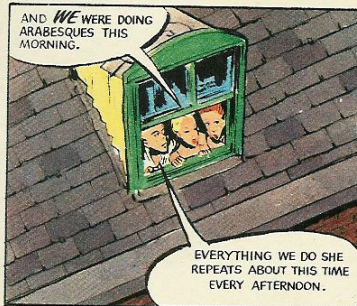
CLIMB UP AND HAVE A LOOK.

GOSH, THIS TABLE'S A BIT WEAK AT THE KNEES !



THERE — DID YOU SEE HER ?

YOU'RE RIGHT, BELLE. SHE'S DOING ARABESQUES.



AND *WE* WERE DOING ARABESQUES THIS MORNING.

EVERYTHING WE DO SHE REPEATS ABOUT THIS TIME EVERY AFTERNOON.



THE MYSTERY LIES ACROSS THE STREET FROM THE ARENSKA SCHOOL IN A TOP FLOOR ROOM WHERE A GIRL IS DANCING.

THAT'S ALL WE EVER SEE OF HER — JUST LEGS AND NO BODY.

POOR LITTLE MISS NOBODY !



NOW WHAT'S HAPPENING — LOOK !

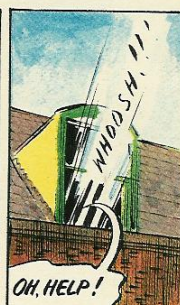
SHE'S STOPPED DANCING. SOMEBODY'S JUST COME IN.



—IT'S A MAN ! AND HE'S SHAKING HIS FIST AT US.

WHATEVER FOR ? HERE, STOP DITHERING !

I'M NOT DITHERING. THE TABLE'S GIV —



OH, HELP !









WE DON'T UNDERSTAND ONE LITTLE BIT.

I'LL SHOW YOU. THIS ROOM IS WHERE I PRACTISE... ONLY I HAVE TO DO IT WHEN DADDY'S NOT HERE.



WHO ARE THE THREE SWALLOWS?

I CALL YOU THAT BECAUSE YOU'RE SO GRACEFUL... I WATCH YOU PRACTISING DOWN THERE.



THEN I TRY TO IMITATE YOU. YOU'VE BEEN DOING *SWAN LAKE*. HAVEN'T YOU?

YES, WE'RE PUTTING ON A SPECIAL SHOW FOR MADAME ARENSKA'S BIRTHDAY.



THERE'S MADAME ARENSKA HERSELF, CROSSING TO ANSWER THE FRONT DOOR.

WHOEVER'S CALLING ON HER AT THIS HOUR?



GOODNESS, IT'S DADDY! AND HE'S EVER SO ANGRY.

HE'S GONE ROUND TO COMPLAIN ABOUT US. WHAT SHALL WE DO?



HE'LL BE SO C-CROSS. HE HATES B-BALLET. HE SAYS IT'S A W-WASTE OF T-TIME. AND I D-DO SO LOVE IT!

WE'LL THINK OF SOMETHING. DON'T WORRY.



THE LIGHT'S GONE ON IN THE KITCHEN. THAT MEANS MADAME ARENSKA'S MAKING HIM SOME TEA.



GOSH, WHAT AN IDEA!



BELLE WHISPERS SOMETHING IN RENÉE'S EAR AND...

BUT WE SHAN'T HAVE TIME!



WE SHALL IF WE HURRY. COME ON!



THERE IS A RUSH OF SCURRYING FEET ON THE LANDING...



... AND EAGER FACES PASS INTO THE STREET OUTSIDE







The stolen copies of *Twinkle* flag up another set of references, as well as memories. It was a British weekly title which was sporadically bought for me and formed a dramatic contrast with the superhero titles. It was an important title for very young girls and, I believe, the only nursery comic that consciously addressed a gendered audience, as indicated by the way that the strapline after the title ran, 'specially for little girls'. Accordingly, it often had similar content to titles for older girls, including a focus on work. For instance, *Twinkle* featured a narrative about 'Nancy the Little Nurse', who helped her grandfather mend toys. I returned to this comic and that narrative in 2008, in writing about the many tales about nurses that appeared in British girls' comics. *Twinkle* also featured a number of magical friend stories and a range of activities including a cut out doll.

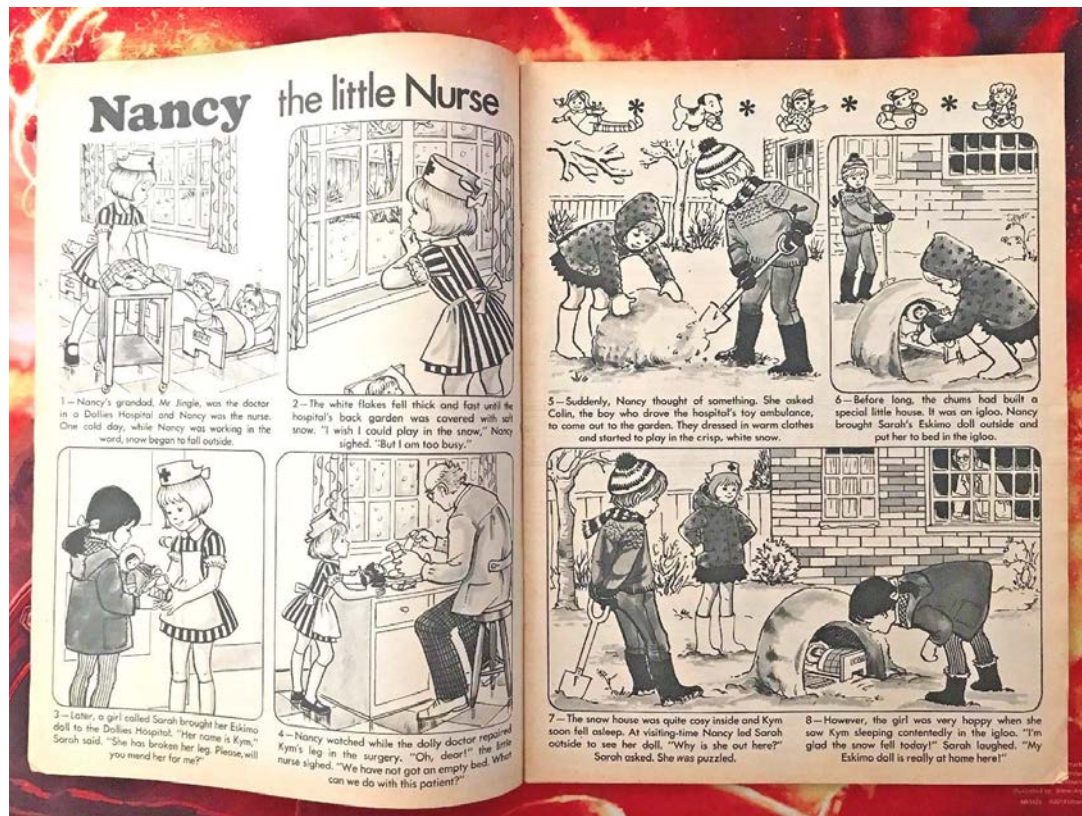


Figure 2. 'Nancy the Little Nurse' (*Twinkle*, No. 362, 28th Dec 1974)

I fear that as a child I felt the material in the girls' titles was somehow constraining in comparison to the content of superhero comics. It was only later, in researching girls and comics, that I became fully aware of the diverse narratives that existed and that these titles were often ground-breaking in terms of both approach and content. Engaging with girls' comics as an academic, in hoping to understand what these texts meant to readers, helped me grasp the complex nature of the genre and how readers understood those comics, using them as identifiers of self, often in opposition to monolithic readings of girlhood and



the girls comic. However, as a child with limited funds to draw on, I simply opted for what I saw as more exciting and less directive. The full color in the superhero titles was also, I admit, an attraction.

However, to return to memory, in largely rejecting British girls' comics as a slightly older child (preferring, by the mid-1970s, as I entered my teens, the *X-Men* and Franco-Belgian albums in translation, particularly *Asterix*, *Lucky Luke* and *Tintin*) I was consciously cutting myself off from what was a major genre and shared cultural experience. I now suspect it was also an attempt to disengage from British girlhood and what I saw as the expectations surrounding it. It was also about this time that I became an avid reader of science fiction for adults, which further moved me away from girls' culture.

To put the scale of this rejection in context, British girls' comics existed for every age group, as the depiction of the characters in the two narratives above suggests. These weekly anthology publications formed the majority of reading of most British girls between the 1950s and 1990s, with over fifty titles existing through this period and major ones circulating between 800,000 and a million per week. It was, in effect, the dominant form of comic aimed at girls, and created a potential feminine reading trajectory that ran from *Twinkle*, through *Bunty* and similar titles aimed at those under twelve, to titles for older readers focused on heterosexual romance and popular culture such as *Roxy* in the 1950s, and later *Jackie* and on to magazines. What is also significant about these narratives is that romance only featured in titles for older readers and the worlds depicted in girls comics were about their friendships and rivalries, not about boys.

The narratives they included changed over time especially from the late 1970s to 1990s, some becoming rather bleaker and horror-inflected and others opting for realism via the inclusion of photo stories. Further, a number were slowly converted into magazines, reflecting what were seen as changing interests amongst girls. This shift also served to emphasize that comics were for boys, which the sales figures for girls' titles actually contradicted. However, as I became a teenager, I was increasingly uncomfortable about talking about my interest in comics, as cultural assumptions about reading meant that I was often told to read magazines for older girls or women instead. Additionally, actively seeking out superhero comics put me firmly in a male zone, including one specialist shop where I was known as 'the girl', and seen as a rarity. This meant that I inhabited a liminal zone around popular periodical reading and gender.

To return to the kinds of narratives that existed, the titles for younger readers featured a number of dominant types. There were schoolgirl investigators, school stories of various kinds, work related stories, those tied to popular activities like ballet, ice skating, horse riding or gymnastics and ones about friendships. They also contained ghost stories, ones where girls had magical friends, rags to riches narratives, and tales about animals of various kinds. There were, in addition, forays into science fiction and fantasy, with a number containing heroines with magical or other powers. The umbrella of the girls' comic, then, had a very diverse range of material beneath it. The following examples give a small indication of some of what was available.

I begin with 'The Silent Three', an example of the girl investigator narrative and one of the most popular narratives in what was one of the most popular titles for girls in the 1950s. Whilst the majority of girl investigator narratives do not incorporate costumes, here the three friends wear matching domino masks and cloaks. The friends' activities are also part of a type of secret society at school. Consequently, investigative narratives in this particular story run alongside ones about everyday school life, including school bullies attempting to either find out about or discredit those in the society. This has some

obvious links with concepts in the superhero titles including the vulnerability of the hero and the secret identity. This is despite the private all-girl school and middle (or upper middle) class context of the narrative. The villains, as suggested in the images below, as well as the school bullies, may also be, like those in some Enid Blyton books, class 'others'.



Figure 3. 'The Silent Three'. (*School Friend Annual*, AP, 1958, p. 7)



I next turn to the most popular of the titles for pre-teens in the late 1950s and on, *Bunty*, which I experienced entirely as a 'pass-along reader'. The following images all come from that periodical. I chose to use a single edition here to show different styles of illustration, the use of color and the mixture of new and reprinted material.

Unlike *School Friend* and *Girl*, the key difference was that in *Bunty* the publisher aimed to create comics that they hoped would appeal to working class readers, so developing new markets by further differentiating the audience by class as well as age. Again, as with *Girl*, the actual audience read across class lines. Familiar tropes and narratives were given new twists in *Bunty*, most notably, perhaps, in schoolgirl stories. This was the case in 'The Four Marys', where one of the 'Marys' was a working-class scholarship pupil. This was the narrative most often mentioned by respondents in my 2015 book on memories of comics, and had an impact on several generations of readers. It was reported as about community, unity and friendship, and as enabling girls to overcome obstacles, a narrative of productive and positive inclusion, as is implied by aspects of the story in Figure 4.

However, this approach could be double-edged given that this narrative, like many others, focused on the problems of being a working-class outsider. The stories tended to be concerned with the struggle of such outsiders to deal with the snobbery of, and bullying by, both staff and other pupils. So, on the one hand, one might become one of a very close-knit group of friends, but on the other, one might be victimized because of a perceived difference from the school 'norm'. As someone who had been severely bullied in school by a teacher before the age of eleven, such stories were far too close to my actual experience to be pleasant reading, again resulting in rejection, especially as I was unconvinced that I would eventually win out as the heroines in the comics did.

These particular genre stories, then, can be interpreted in very different ways. The example below, which appeared in the early 1970s, is a reprint of a much earlier story, as the style of art suggests, along with the uniforms and the dress of the teachers. Here the focus is inter-school sports rivalry and about the consequences of being a 'show-off', in this case about a school having superior sports facilities. There is, all the same, a sub-narrative about who is included on the team, with snobbery playing a major part in tensions within the school.



The four Marys were pupils at St Elmo's School for Girls, and shared the same study in Bee's House. Bowdale College, a new boarding school for girls, with fine, modern buildings, had recently opened near St Elmo's, and great rivalry existed between the two schools. Mary Simpson and Mary Field were picked for the Junior Hockey team to play at Bowdale. On the day before the match there was a hard frost.



WATCH HOW YOU GO, GIRLS. IT'S TERRIBLY SLIPPERY!

IF IT'S LIKE THIS TOMORROW, THE HOCKEY WILL BE CANCELLED.

Jane Hogarth, the Junior Hockey Captain, slipped and fell down the House steps.



OOH! MY ANKLE!

SHE LANDED WITH AN AWFUL BUMP!



MY ANKLE TURNED UNDER ME!

WE'LL TAKE YOU ALONG TO MATRON.



That afternoon, Mabel Lentham, a snobbish, unpopular Bee's House Third Former, met Glenda Marshall from Bowdale.

WE WON OUR FIRST HOCKEY MATCH EIGHT-NOTHING.

YOU'LL BEAT OUR ROTTEN TEAM SIXTEEN-NOTHING! THEY'VE HAD THE NERVE TO LEAVE ME OUT!

But, when Mabel returned to St Elmo's, Jane Hogarth sent for her.



I'VE HURT MY ANKLE, AND I'M OUT OF THE GAME TOMORROW. YOU'LL TAKE MY PLACE AT RIGHT HALF.

OH, GOOD! I'M UTTERLY, UTTERLY SURE WE SHALL WIN NOW!

Next morning the three Marys took an early look at the weather.



IT'S ALL RIGHT! THE FROST HAS GONE!

THE GAME WON'T BE CANCELLED!

So, that afternoon, the St Elmo's Juniors made the short journey to Bowdale, and were taken into the fine new pavilion. Moira Becke, the Bowdale Junior Hockey Captain, showed the visitors their dressing-room.



IT'S SAID WE HAVE THE FINEST SCHOOL PAVILION IN THE COUNTRY.

IT SEEMS TO HAVE EVERYTHING EXCEPT TELEVISION!

OUR PITCH IS OF A HIGH ENOUGH STANDARD FOR COUNTY HOCKEY.

THEN LET'S GO OUT AND PLAY ON IT!



but the game doesn't last long!



Figure 4. 'The Four Marys' (Bunty, DC Thomson, 832, Dec. 22 1973, pp. 16-17)

The next two images, also from *Bunty*, are included to illustrate the domestic and everyday life aspects of the title. The first is the title page featuring the 'Bunty' picture story which was an often humorous and affectionate account of the titular Bunty's life. The anthropomorphized dog in the top corner, whilst a surreal addition, is based on Bunty's dog, which appears in a more normal form in other stories. Many of these comics had a title which was a girls' name and the contents and cover were, in effect, a summation of a form of girlhood and of the inferred age and gender suitable interests of the potential reader. As with the *Twinkle* narrative above there are captions, but no speech balloons, so Figure 5 also shows how British comics for girls maintained a range of modes of address.

The last page of the same edition (Figure 6), featured what was also described in interview (2015) as one of the best remembered aspects of the title across the whole period of the publication of the title, the cut out doll. These pages were often seasonally themed, as is the case here, given that the reader is asked to choose an outfit for a Christmas party. Note also that despite the very different styles of drawing the girls on the front and back cover are both meant to be Bunty, emphasizing the overall identity of the periodical. To actually play with the dolls, in an era before photocopying or scanning were commonplace, meant that the reader had to destroy the ending of the final story, forcing a choice of what was more important to them as individuals. The title was, then, interactive to an extent and this activity serves to point out the agency of the reader.



No. 832—DECEMBER 22, 1973.

# BUNTY



EVERY TUESDAY PRICE 3p.



What's Bunty got to shout about?  
She's looked her spade and bucket out.



With small niece, May, all bright  
and gay,  
She's off out in the snow today.



Both hard at work now, all aglow,  
They're building castles in the snow.  
Just like on the beach—remember?  
They've brought some June into December!

Figure 5. Bunty front cover. (*Bunty*, DC Thomson, 832, Dec. 22 1973, p. 1)







There were, as mentioned above a number of narratives that featured girls with powers of one kind or another. One of the most popular was Valda (Figure 7) who featured in *Mandy* from the late 1960s into the 1980s. Many of the narratives focus on adventures, which makes the character increasingly distinct from the domestic and the victim heroine in the comics. Others feature her skills and prowess in a number of sports, including ice skating, tennis and diving. However, she also fights evil and rescues those in difficulty, the latter as shown in Figure 7. She takes her power in part from the crystal depicted around her neck in the main panel, but also has to bathe regularly in the flames of the 'fire of life', ensuring the continuation of her skills and youthful appearance, despite being over 200 years old. As a child, what particularly impressed me about this particular story, in one of the few girls' annuals that I owned, was the abrupt way in which the narrative was introduced. To simply dismiss the concerns and questions of adult males in favor of following one's own agenda sounded wonderful. Here, then, is another point of contact between girls' comics and my preferred superhero comics, in what can be recognized as a non-costumed female hero with powers who is assertive and independent. Here the directive aspects, or the focus on suffering, that appeared in other narratives is absent, offering space for celebration, rather than modification, of the self.

**CAPTAIN JOHN BENNET** and **Don Davis** were members of the British team which set out to climb the unconquered Mount Kachunga. They were only a few hundred yards from the summit—but they were in serious trouble!



The amazing

# VALDA



Valda gripped the exhausted climbers by the hand, and a sudden surge of new strength and energy passed in a mysterious fashion to Bennet and Davis!





Figure 7. 'Valda'. (*Mandy Annual*, DC Thomson, 1976, p.2)

What the examples above indicate is that there was generally a quite self-contained world, or model, of girlhood (with various age and class inflections) in each of these titles. This was, on the part of some publishers, purposive in maintaining a space between younger girls and popular culture. Popular culture was seen as potentially corrupting, especially for girls, in the mid twentieth century. That comics could be seen as part of that culture was contained by publishers through incorporating content that could be read by adult gatekeepers such as parents as protecting girls from its worst excesses. Comics were consequently not generally part of the synergy around other forms of popular culture and so became lower profile, increasingly detached from the more consumerist model of girlhood offered in magazines.

However, this protectionist stance was not consistently followed. Figure 8 offers an example of a very different approach, given that another way of reading the self-contained worlds of many girls' comics is not as protection of the girl reader, but as a failure to capitalize on the marketing of other cultural products. The chosen example illustrates the practice of closely shadowing popular television programs from the mid-1960s on. There were comics like *Lady Penelope* (City, 1966-1969), which in addition to its obvious commitment to *Thunderbirds* also featured strips on *The Monkees* and *Bewitched* (Gifford, 1975, p.95). However, this example is from *June*, a comic that included strips based on television, but was not dominated by them. 'The Growing up of Emma Peel' offers an extension to the series, in what might now be called a prequel. The unfortunate cook that features on the page is later explained to be Emma's trainer in a number of forms of combat and his role is rather like that of Alfred in *Batman*. The dialogue serves to suggest that Emma's father does not take her seriously, but her exclamation 'Got it! At last!' is used to show the reader that, far from being a dilettante, she is determined and committed. Here too there is an underlying positioning of the girl as to be shaped, in this case indicating the need for self-discipline in achieving aims. The adult Emma is shown in the photograph that leads into the story, and the assumption is that the reader will be aware of the series, but the emphasis is on what is needed to achieve both her glamorousness and her capacity for action.

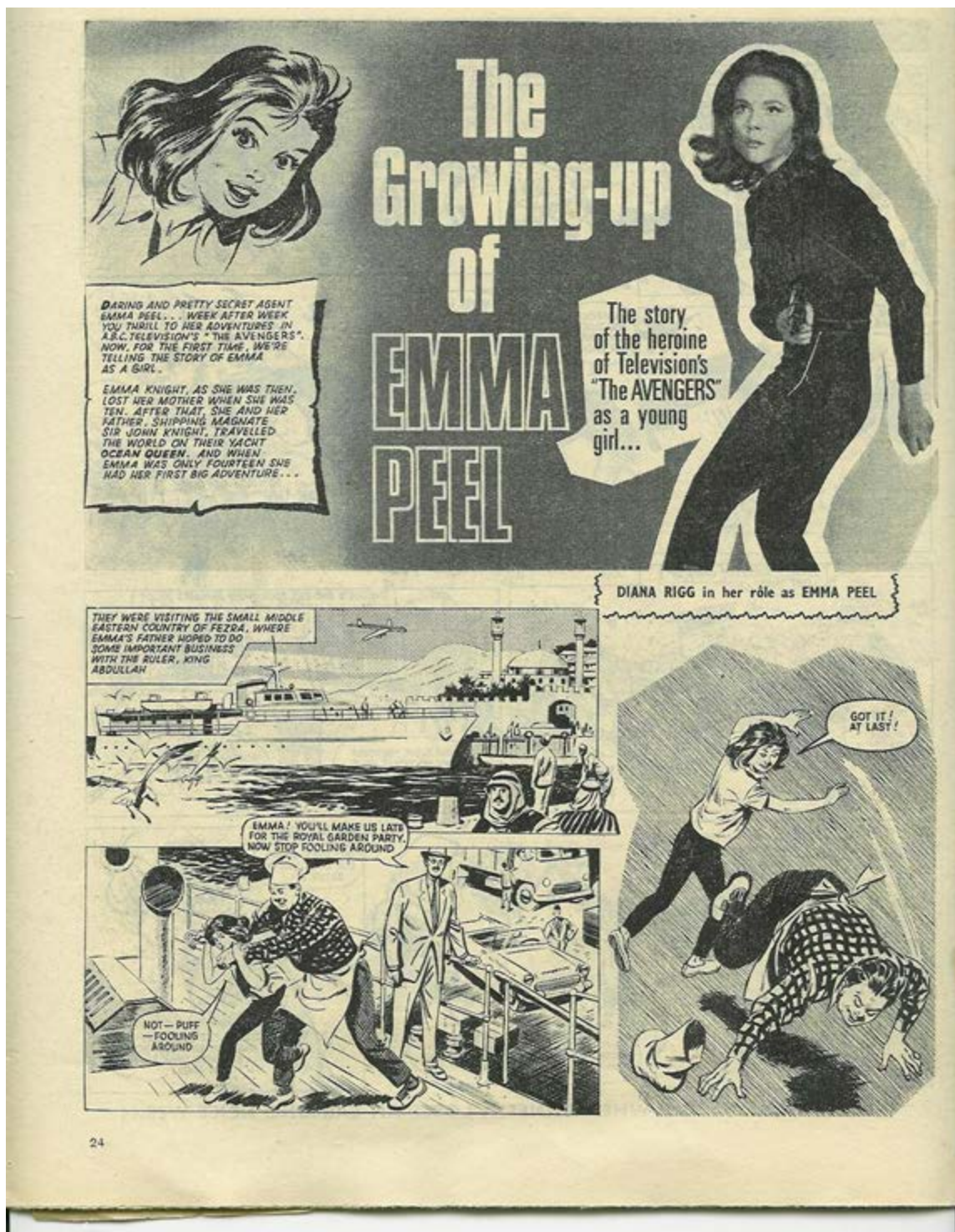


Figure 8. 'The Growing up of Emma Peel'. (*June*, Fleetway, Jan. 29 1966, p. 24)

A very contrasting example, which moves away from the concept of agency and glamour and reflects the move towards learning through difficulty and emotional turmoil, is seen in Figure 9, a story which featured in *Tammy* from 1974 to 1984.



As noted above stories in British girls' comics generally became bleaker as the twentieth century progressed, and made extensive use of the victim heroine motif. Here, as well as incorporating the increasingly fashionable activity of gymnastics, popularized through television coverage of the Olympic Games in the 1970s, especially through the figure of Olga Korbut, the story features a main character who is another working class outsider. As with the school stories mentioned earlier, the focus is on Bella's trials and challenges, initially at the hands of relatives who want her to use her skills to steal on their behalf, and later on the part of the gymnastic establishment, as the example below shows. However, in contrast to the adult male characters her body constantly breaks the frame and the images seem to celebrate the inability of the form of the comic to control her moving figure. The narrative also celebrates her class position, rather than attempting to direct her into becoming a middle-class girl, and locates her as thriving, rather than simply surviving.

# Bella

Bella Barlow was teaching gymnastics in Ramouki — its ruler, The Shah, wanting to modernise his country. During a break, Bella told her pupils about one of her adventures in Canada. She'd been offered a job by a Mr Cox, and in order to speed things up, she'd climbed through a window of his hotel. But she'd been mistaken for a cat burglar...

Written by: Primrose Cumming  
Drawn by: John Armstrong







Figure 9. 'Bella at the Bar'. (Tammy, IPC, Jan. 15 1983, pp. 14-16)

To conclude, the general cultural consensus, or rather, stereotype, about British girls' comics was that they were less significant than comics for boys, or other types of comic, specifically because they had been created for a young female audience.

In some ways I adopted that stereotype, as it was not the British girl's titles that I was drawn to in becoming an 'aca-fan', but the superhero titles from the USA. I was influenced in this initial choices of focus by what had become a life-long engagement with that specific genre. However, in writing this article, I recognize that I did not exclusively read in that genre, but like most children in Britain, across a range, including the girls' comic.

In looking at examples from material that I had at the time, rather than titles came into my growing comics collection as an 'aca-fan', when I became interested in exploring women's memories of comics, I can see a number of links across the two genres that dominated my childhood reading, a few of which I have started to draw out above.

What surprises me most in revisiting my childhood reading, is how much the body in movement and physicality, much like superhero titles, is significant in girls' comics, whether through activities seen as specifically signifying girlhood, or simply through being adventurous and engaged with others.

Finally, returning to memory, revisiting these titles evokes an emotional response, as they bring back discomfort with notions of traditional femininity, as well as tensions around school. I have a clearer understanding, perhaps, of why I rejected girls' comics generally, but I can see that some were, and are, important and positive aspects of my reading history.

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